THANKSGIVING
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Psalm 100
Luke 17:11–19

"Enter his gates with thanksgiving. . . .
For the Lord is good."
Psalm 100:4–5 (NRSV)

Another thing I have learned about real gifts is that they always come with a person attached. . . .
Every new dawn of every morning, every drop of rain,
every budding tulip, every blade of grass,
every lovely thought we think, every wonderful feeling we feel,
every memory of pleasure past, every tingle of pleasure present,
every touch of a loved one's hand, every hug from a laughing child,
every note of a Mozart concerto, every coming home to our own place and people,
every new hope that sees beyond a hard present—all of them are gifts with a *P*erson attached.

Lewis B. Smedes
My God and I

We come here this morning, O God, with hearts full of gratitude.
We thank you for all blessings of our life, for this church,
for the freedom to gather here and to practice our religion.
Now bless us with your grace—to hear the word you have for us today.
Startle us, again with your truth, mercy and love, in Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord. Amen.

In the rhythm of life in this great city, and in this church located on one of the busiest, most interesting urban intersections in the world, this season is, I think, the best.

The cultural and commercial holiday season officially started yesterday. The lights on Michigan Avenue came on last evening. At six o'clock, Mickey Mouse counted down from five to one and all the lights came on—including our own electric sheep. We too flipped the switch on at the very moment the tiny white light came on up and down the Avenue. We're quite proud of that feat actually. Not wanting to be swept off our feet by the trappings of the

cultural celebration, we go our own quiet way, balancing the hullabaloo of the kick-off parade last evening, with its loud, raucous floats, Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Goofy, Kermit and Miss Piggy, a brass band from Switzerland, and Santa—a little too frenetic for my tastes, raising his arms like a Bears defensive back trying to arouse the crowd at Soldier Field—riding in the back of a pick-up truck. You would have thought he could afford an elegant sleigh. So we go our own quiet way by singing some carols on the church steps and illuminating five sheep, quietly grazing—a modest reminder of a drama that played out on a Judean hillside and a Bethlehem stable 2,000 years ago.

And it all happens a week before Thanksgiving, when in this country we appoint a day for acknowledging and giving thanks for all the blessings of life.

Gratitude, is, after all, at the very heart of our faith, the fundamental Christian emotion. Gratitude, the theologians have always said, is the basic human response to the goodness and mercy of God and to grace, God's undeserved and unconditional love. At the heart of Christian experience and teaching is not guilt, as we have sometimes been taught; not obligation, as we occasionally conclude and teach; but gratitude, pure and simple—gratitude for God's grace, gratitude because all of life, all of it, is a gift we did not earn but were given.

One time Jesus was on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem and on the road he encountered ten men, each of whom suffered from leprosy. That is to say they were physically sick and socially rejected. No one wanted to have anything to do with them, not even their families. The ten were a company of the miserable. "Jesus, master, have mercy on us," they called to him and he did. "Go, show yourselves to the priests," the ones who could certify that leprosy was gone and the person was once again fit for normal human relationships. On the way to the priests for verification, they were made clean. Nine kept on walking to show the priest. One stopped in his tracks, ran back to find Jesus, fell on his face at Jesus' feet, and thanked him.

Jesus asks about the other nine and then says a very interesting thing to the grateful man at his feet: "Get up and go on your way: your faith has made you well."

Now notice that we don't know anything about this man's religion. He is a Samaritan, but we don't know what his theology is. We don't know a thing about his moral values, whether he is pro-choice or pro-life, for or against this or that. We don't know how he voted or how he spends his sabbath. All we know is that he recognized a gift when he saw it, returned to say thank you, and Jesus said about him, "Your faith has made you well," which surely is to say that by Jesus' definition, faith and gratitude are very closely

related, that faith without gratitude is maybe not faith at all, and that there is something life-giving about gratitude.

Notice also that the man's wellness is more than being rid of his dread disease. Wellness, wholeness—some scholars translate the word *wellness* as "salvation": "Your faith has saved you," in which case being grateful and saying thank you are absolutely at the heart of God's plan for the human race and God's intent for each of us.

Yale's David Bartlett says this story is an account of two healings: from leprosy and, even more important, from ingratitude. Ingratitude, from Jesus' perspective, is sinful, life-threatening, spirit-threatening, health and well-being threatening sin.

Stanley Hauerwas is a professor of Christian ethics at Duke, always provocative, occasionally controversial, and a superb teacher. In an academic paper published by Notre Dame, "A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic," he tells a story about a gift he was given and his sin of ingratitude.

When Hauerwas was a student at Yale Divinity School, his father, a Texas bricklayer, was building, from scratch, a deer rifle—"boring the barrel, setting the sight, hand-carving the stock." During summer vacation, when Hauerwas was home, his father showed him the beautiful rifle. Hauerwas didn't realize that it was a gift, that his father was making the rifle for him, his son. He reflects, "Flushed with theories about the importance of truthfulness and the irrationality of our society's gun policy I said, 'Of course, you realize that it will not be long before we as a society are going to have to take all these things away from you people.'" It was, Hauerwas said, "one of the lowest points of my moral development. . . . I was simply not morally mature enough to know how to respond properly when a gracious gift was being made." He saw a social issue instead of a gift. What he did not see was the giver behind the gift. The moral issue here, he now knows, was the father—and the son's ingratitude. (See George Stroup, *Before God,* p. 148–149.)

The late Lewis Smedes makes the same point in a little book he wrote shortly before he died. It's about his personal religious experience, and near the end there is a simple little chapter on gratitude. "When it comes to gratitude," he wrote, "we who are old have an advantage. We have more good gifts to remember and therefore more opportunities to be grateful for them." He learned over the years, "that a gift always comes with a giver attached, a person attached." At the age of eighty-one, Smedes said he remembered "magnificent things and little things" and felt grateful for both. "I remember that Jesus died to do whatever needed doing to let the river of God's love sweep me to himself, and I remember the Velcro that

makes it easy to put on my sandals. I remember [my mother] and our first garage door opener. . . . Big things, little things, it matters little so long as they were gifts with a person attached" (*My God and I,* p. 170).

One time the National Press Club invited the Reverend Fred Rogers to one of its much publicized luncheons. The events are famous for bringing together top diplomats, government officials, leaders in business and industry, sometimes heads of state, and the press, of course. When Mr. Rogers was the speaker, attendees joked ahead of time that it was going to be a "light lunch."

Mr. Rogers began by taking out his pocket watch and announcing that he wanted to start his speech with two minutes of silence during which he invited each person present to "remember people in their past—parents, teachers, coaches, friends, and others—who had made it possible for them to accomplish so much" and to be where they were today. . . . The room grew quiet as the seconds ticked away. A reporter said that one could hear all around the room people sniffling as they were moved by the memories of those who had made sacrifices on their behalf and who had given them many gifts" (Thomas Long, *Testimony,* p. 110).

"Your faith has made you well," Jesus said. Your grateful faith, your gratitude has healed you and saved you.

Actually there is evidence that Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about. Just in time for Thanksgiving, colleague Tom Rook found on the internet a website, WebMDHealth, with the topic "Boost Your Health with a Dose of Gratitude." The essay cited thousands of years of philosophic and religious teaching urging gratitude and then cited new evidence that "grateful people—people for whom gratitude is a permanent trait—have a health edge on not-so-grateful people." It may be that if you're grateful for your life you take better care of yourself. But there is also evidence that gratitude is a great stress reducer, that grateful people are generally more optimistic and hopeful, and that there are links between gratitude and the immune system. So your mother was right when she made you call your grandmother and thank her for the birthday card and insisted that you sit down and write thank-you notes.

Gratitude is a worldview, a way of looking at and living life. Rabbi Harold Kushner, commenting on that wonderful phrase in the Twenty-Third Psalm, "My cup runneth over," says, "Gratitude is more than remembering to mumble 'thank you.' It's more than a ritual of politeness. Gratitude is a way of looking at the world that does not change the facts of your life but has the power to make your life more enjoyable."

Kushner illustrates the difference.

> Each night as I prepare for bed I put drops in my eyes to fend off the threat of glaucoma that would rob me of my sight and take from me the pleasure of reading. Each morning at breakfast, I take a pill to control my blood pressure, and each evening at dinner I take another to control my cholesterol level. But instead of lamenting the ailments that come with growing older, instead of wishing I was as young and as fit as I once was, I take my medicine with a prayer of thanks that modern science has found ways to help me cope with those ailments. I think of all my ancestors who didn't live long enough to develop the complications of old age and did not have pills to take when they did. (*The Lord Is My Shepherd*, p. 154)

When I read that, I couldn't help but think of my Grandfather Buchanan, a big man with snow-white hair. He was a foreman in the Pennsylvania Railroad shops, who, for as long as I knew him, walked with a limp, used a cane, and who had enormous difficulty getting in and out of an automobile. My brother and I used to love it when Pop maneuvered his ample backside into position, took aim, and then just let go and fell into the passenger seat, causing the car to rock. I know now that he couldn't bend his hips; he had serious arthritis I suspect, classic hip disease, for which the orthopedists at Northwestern Memorial have a very effective operation.

Gratitude is a worldview. Kushner knows a man who writes "Thank you" on every check he writes, even to the IRS. Ingratitude never recognizes the gift. A friend of mine used to say that at tax time, instead of complaining, he always found himself wishing his tax bill were higher. "I'd love to pay more income taxes," he used to say. "I'd love to be in the highest bracket of all."

Gratitude is a way of looking at the world. And when it is that, it is not dependent on having an abundance of things for which to give thanks. In fact there is something about authentic gratitude that expresses itself most eloquently in the midst of adversity and trouble.

There was in this country an outpouring of gratitude after September 11, 2001. The Pilgrims, those hearty souls whose Thanksgiving feast we commemorate every year, were not celebrating abundance. Half of their number had died after one year in the new world. All but three families had dug graves and buried children, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers. The seeds and plants they brought with them did poorly. Starvation was a real possibility. It was corn, given to them by the natives, that saved them from starvation. Governor Bradford wrote in his journal, "The whole country full of woods and thickets represented a wild and savage hue, if they looked behind them there was the mighty ocean. What could sustain them but the spirit of God and his grace?"

The Pilgrims knew the biblical story of God's providence and grace to Israel, God's promise of love in good times and not-so-good times, God's grace given in Jesus Christ for all people regardless of worldly circumstance.

Every year at this time I remember my first Thanksgiving sermon as an ordained minister, November 1963. In fact, I was working on my first Thanksgiving sermon when the call came telling me that President Kennedy had been assassinated. With the rest of the nation, we put everything aside and sat in front of the television set for days grieving, worrying. Every clergy in the land rewrote the sermon that week. And every one of them was about the authentic gratitude for the gift of life, for the gift of God's love, precisely in the face of adversity and a difficult time of national mourning.

There is something about adversity that makes gratitude even more profound. Psychologist Abraham Maslow said that a fully mature adult has the "ability to appreciate again and again, freshly and naively, the basic goods of life with awe, pleasure, wonder, and even ecstasy" regardless of what is happening (See Kushner, p.150).

And a good friend and member of this congregation who suffered in her family the most dreadful tragedy one could imagine family wrote later, "I have learned not to hold back love. . . . You don't waste time being afraid when you realize how brief life is." You try to live each day, she says, as a precious gift of God. (Jeanne Bishop, in *Religion and the Death Penalty*, p. 267).

The basic Christian experience is not obligation or guilt, but gratitude, gratitude for the gift of life. Gratitude for the world. Gratitude for dear people who grace and enrich our lives

The gifts come with a person attached, and so every week, when we come here to be a church together, we begin by saying thank you to God, standing and singing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

The basic Christian experience is gratitude for God's grace in Jesus Christ and the gift of hopeful confidence and wholeness and wellness that comes with it.

For magnificent gifts, for small, quiet gifts, for the gift of God's love, we give thanks.

The best Thanksgiving prayer I read or heard this year came from a four-year-old. We've been dealing with a newborn granddaughter and heart surgery and an extended hospital stay, including weeks in Pediatric

Cardiology Intensive Care. When the baby finally was strong enough to graduate from intensive care with lots of wires and breathing and feeding tubes and monitors and gauges and computer screens, four-year-old Eleanor, her cousin, offered her bedtime prayer:

> Dear God,
> Thank you for bringing us a new baby,
> thank you for naming her Ella,
> thank you for moving her to a regular room,
> so that I can go visit her.
> Amen.

That is grateful faith—to make us all well.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.